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CHAPTER 3

Talal Asad and the Question of Islamic Secularities

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In this chapter I explore Talal Asad's genealogy of the 'secular' and its complex relationship with Christianity and western colonialism. In particular, I critique the notion of secularism as an alien political form imposed by western colonialism on Islamic societies. Instead, I argue that formations of the secular are better understood in terms of 'uneven and combined development' and 'connected histories'. I then turn to Talal Asad's genealogy of the secularisation thesis which, from his perspective, is seen not as a neutral social theory, but rather as the scientific justification for a technique of statecraft developed and deployed in the nineteenth century as an instrument of nationalism and colonialism. I explore some of these arguments with reference to Asad's critique of José Casanova's restatement of the secularisation thesis in the course of which a qualified defence of 'secularisation' understood as 'functional differentiation' is proffered. The chapter concludes by exploring the potential for synthesising genealogy and sociology to understand secularisation. It is hoped that this discussion will help bring Asad's genealogical approach to the secular into a dialogue with sociological approaches from the Marxist and Weberian traditions.

SECULARISM, CHRISTIANITY AND COLONIALISM

Talal Asad's rich and influential scholarship has been part of a growing international current of thought that seeks to problematise the 'secular' and demonstrate its imbrication with religion, particularly Christianity.¹ The idea that secularity has its roots in Christianity has been argued by Marcel Gaucher (Christianity

¹ Chrulew 2015: 144.

as the 'religion of the end of religion') and more recently by Charles Taylor, who maps the emergence of the secular as it develops within and out of Latin Christendom.² Other thinkers, such as Carl Schmitt and more recently John Gray, have argued that the political theory of the modern liberal state (especially the concepts of sovereignty and human rights) are secularised religious myths drawn from the Christian narrative.³ The idea of secularism as disguised Christianity, as a sort of 'Christianity in sheep's clothing', as Aziz al-Azmeh puts it, is a variation 'of an older trope of denigration directed at the Enlightenment, at the French revolution and later at Marxism, and now at secularism'.⁴ But as we see further below, this notion of a Christian essence inherent in secularism is problematic, as it posits a structural continuity between historical formations that does not adequately account for the 'historical breaks, structural transformations, innovations and functional differentiations that came with modernity'.⁵ It also does not account for the complexity of church-state relations in Europe historically, which were by no means uniform, and do not correspond with this assumption of internal emergence and continuity.⁶

While Talal Asad sees secularism as a western norm and a unique product of post-Reformation western history, he does not see the secular as simply a mask for Christianity, rather he makes a more subtle argument about their co-constitution, tracing the shifting boundaries of 'religion' and the 'secular' to multiple sources and episodes in western history.⁷ For Asad the idea that there is some trans-historical and transcultural essence called 'religion' is only about 300 years old. Indeed, the concept of religion as requiring assent to a set of propositions is a legacy of post-Reformation western history. This is counter-posed with religion in the 'non-West' where it is allegedly a communal, embodied and ritualistic set of practices that shapes social and public institutions in a way that is not adequately captured by the concept of 'religion' drawn from the historical experience of Christianity. The Renaissance, the emergence of humanism, the European wars of religion, the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment and European colonialism are all relevant to understanding the emergence of the categories of the 'religious' and the 'secular'.⁸

In Asad's schema, it is due to these processes that secularism emerged as a political ideology premised on the assumption that it is possible and desirable to isolate 'religion' from the 'secular' sphere. Specifically, the understanding of 'religion' that secularism presupposes is a product of a reconfiguration of power

² Taylor 2007; Gaucher 1998.

³ Gray 2011; Schmitt 1985.

⁴ Al-Azmeh 2019: xxxvii.

⁵ Al-Azmeh 2019: xxxix.

⁶ Al-Azmeh 2019: xxxix.

⁷ Asad 2003: 26.

⁸ Asad 1993: 27-55, 2003: 22-66, 190-4.

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